

FIRST NIGHT AT THE THEATRE

Lillian Gish Gives a Notable Performance in Foote's 'The Trip to Bountiful'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Everything being possible, Lillian Gish may some day give a finer performance than her Mrs. Carrie Watts in "The Trip to Bountiful," which opened at Henry Miller's last evening. But no one has a right ever to expect anything finer. For this is Miss Gish's masterpiece. As a weary old woman, homesick for her youth in the country, she gives an inspired performance that is alive in every detail and conveys an unconquerable spirit.

The play by Horton Foote is a narrative that supplies Miss Gish with honest material but does not take much of the burden off her shoulders. All it has to say is that Mrs. Watts is a lonely woman who has to live with a daughter-in-law who hates her and a son who does not dare take her side.

Life being intolerable for every member of the family in their small Houston apartment, Mrs. Watts dreams of escaping back to Bountiful where she was born and once lived a fruitful and peaceful life. She does run away. She catches a bus for the next town to Bountiful. She finds friendly people on the bus and along the way. And she does have a few blissful moments in the weed-grown dooryard of her old home before her son and daughter-in-law come to fetch her back to Houston.

* * *

That does not make a very substantial play for a whole evening. Nor does Mr. Foote make things any better by underwriting. He is a scrupulous author who does not want easy victories, and that is to his credit morally. But he might also do a little more for the theatre by going to Bountiful himself as a writer, providing his play with more substance and varying his literary style. He writes "The Trip to Bountiful" as though it were a point of honor with him never to let go. The story is thin, and the dialogue is all in one tone of deliberate flatness.

As a gallery of character portraits, however, his drama has distinction. And under Vincent J. Donehue's direction, the performance is so pitilessly exact that you can hardly tell where the writing leaves off and the acting begins. Jo Van Fleet, who played Camille in "Camino Real" last season, gives another penetrating performance as the irritable daughter-in-law. The part is well-written. By massing his details Mr. Foote discloses the selfishness, emptiness, laziness and cruelty of a shallow wife who dominates the family by the evil-



Lillian Gish as she appears in "The Trip to Bountiful."

never forgets the world that is streaming by her. She is always peering out of the windows. She is alive to other people. Although physically tired, she is an eager person.

The theatre has a whole bagful of tricks for describing old ladies. But Miss Gish never uses any of them. Her portrait of Mrs. Watts is pure art. The character is freshly created. As a whole, "The Trip to Bountiful" is an ingrown play; and Otis Riggs' scenery, which has been executed indifferently, gets pretty mediocre after the first act. But Miss Gish is at the peak of her career in the leading part. It's a triumph of skill and spirit.

The Cast

THE TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL, a play in three acts, by Horton Foote. Staged by Vincent J. Donehue; presented by the Theatre Guild and Fred Coe; scenery by Otis Riggs; costumes by Rose Bogdanoff; lighting by Peggy Clark. At Henry Miller's Theatre.
Mrs. Carrie Watts Lillian Gish
Ludie Watts Gene Lyons
Jessie Mae Watts Jo Van Fleet
Thelma Eva Marie Saint
Houston Ticket Man Will Hare
A Traveler Salem Ludwig
Second Houston Ticket Man David Clive
Harrison Ticket Man Frederic Downs
Sheriff Frank Overton
Travelers.. Patricia MacDonald, Neil Laurence, Helen Cordes

ness of her temper. And Miss Van Fleet acts the part from the inside out with remorseless candor.

Gene Lyons ably expresses the patience and timidity of Mrs. Watts' son, who has no strength left for making decisions. There is a sweet characterization of a soldier's wife by Eva Marie Saint whose senses of pride and sympathy are nicely balanced; and Frank Overton gives a pleasant performance of a sheriff who treats Mrs. Watts with unprofessional forbearance.

But "The Trip to Bountiful" is Miss Gish's play, and she finds all the heartbreak and gallantry that is in it. Looking frail, dressed untidily in a shapeless garment, her hair messy and her face drawn, she gives, nevertheless, an impression of indomitable strength. Her acting is keenly aware. For Mrs. Watts, lost in her private grief,